



Spotty paws and waggy tails: carriage dogs on trial

The British Carriage Dog Society ran their annual National Carriage Dog Trials at Lincomb Farm in Herefordshire where the ever willing and able Dalmatian was put through its paces. Josi Kaal reports

The trial consisted of three elements. First was the obedience test. This was followed by the endurance test over a lovely cross-country course adapted for carriages and available for use as a marathon course by driving clubs. In addition, all Dalmatians went through vet checks, both before they started and again when they finished. A pass was needed in all three elements in order for the Dalmatian to achieve an overall pass for the classes in which it had been entered.

There are two disciplines - road dog and carriage dog. For road dog the handler rode a horse and the Dalmatian ran along with them. For carriage dog, the handler was either the whip or groom on a carriage.

There were three classes - bronze, silver and gold with higher scores and feats of endurance required to achieve each. All parts of the trial were completed with the Dalmatian working off lead.

Enduring the heat

The purpose of the trials was to demonstrate the ability of the Dalmatian to fulfil one of the roles it was originally bred to do, which is

Above: Miranda Purves' Fell pony, Harry, grabs the opportunity for a drink at the water splash. Miranda's Dalmatian, Splash, achieved her Carriage Dog Gold

that of working alongside horses. A major factor for the judges therefore was that the Dalmatian showed willingness and enjoyment of its work throughout.

In 2012 the endurance element of the trials had to be cancelled due to unsafe wet weather conditions and this year was the exact opposite with blazing sunshine and searing heat.

Extra vet checks were put in for the longer distances to ensure that both Dalmatians and horses were coping with the extreme heat.

It takes time, effort and training to prepare for these trials, so it was gratifying to see people turning up to watch the proceedings and the glorious weather provided the perfect conditions for the spectators.

The road dogs' judge Ali Rummey and the carriage dogs' judge Tim Stafford carried out their duties from horseback. The obedience tests took place on a flat field enclosed with a fence. The aim of the obedience test was to replicate, as far as possible, the scenarios encountered in modern horse and carriage working environments, where the dog must be under the handler's control at all times.

Up to 40km

The dog started with 100% and marks were deducted during the test for a wide range of reasons, some serious and some minor. The pass mark for bronze competitors was 50%, silver competitors needed 60% and gold

needed a pass of 70%. This was no mean feat when off lead and coping with distractions such as the spectators seated around the fence, a deliberate distraction dog walking on lead inside the perimeter fence, the atmosphere on the day and the added diversion of swooping swallows skimming across the grass as if taunting the dogs. The judging was firm but fair and a pass was needed in order to move to the next element - the endurance test.

The endurance element tested each Dalmatian's stamina and capacity for work and covered a 10km (six mile) cross country course skirting the fields surrounding Lincomb Equestrian Centre. The course included some very sharp hills, rugged ground and a water obstacle. The bronze competitors had to complete a single circuit of 10km, silver competitors completed two circuits at 20km and gold competitors went round a staggering four times to complete 40km.

The task was made even more challenging because there were also set time limits that the distance had to be completed within.

At the start and finish of the endurance test there was a vet check. This was not only for the safety and wellbeing of the Dalmatians (and the horses which were also checked) it also contributed to the Dalmatian's scoring and the vet is an official judge in the competition.

Dogs needed to pass the vet check at the start in order to be allowed to compete and